

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-07
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FM AMEMBASSY LONDON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7398

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 LONDON 13788

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT UK
SUBJECT: CONSERVATIVES: UNEASILY AT EASE

SUMMARY: THE PARLIAMENT RECESS FINDS THE CONSERVATIVES
IN AN ATTITUDE OF WATCHFUL WAITING, WITH LITTLE IMME-
DIATE PROSPECT OF AN ELECTION ON THE HORIZON WHICH
WOULD, THEY FEEL, RETURN THEM TO POWER. CONSERVATIVES
ARE TRAVELING EXTENSIVELY, WORKING IN THEIR CONSTITU-
ENCIES, AND, IN SOME CASES, WORKING AND HOPING FOR
FAVORABLE RESULTS IN THE LADYWOOD BY-ELECTION. THEY
REMAIN ON THE QUI VIVE TO EXPLOIT GOVERNMENT MISCALCU-
LATIONS AND TO MAINTAIN AN ELECTION READINESS THROUGH-
OUT THE PARTY. END SUMMARY.

1. THE PARLIAMENTARY RECESS HAS BROUGHT A RESPITE TO
THE BELEAGUED GOVERNMENT. BUT HAS BEEN EQUALLY WELCOME
ON THE CONSERVATIVE SIDE. THE PLETHORA OF LATE-NIGHT
SITTINGS, THE OCCASIONAL CLOSE VOTES, THE SEVERAL
CONFIDENCE MOTIONS, AND THE BY-ELECTION TENSIONS HAVE
BEEN AS NERVEWRACKING FOR THE CONSERVATIVES AS THEY
HAVE BEEN FOR THE GOVERNMENT.

2. THE RECESS OFFERS THE CONSERVATIVES A BREATHING
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SPACE. IT'S A TIME FOR LONG-OLANNED-FOR FAMILY VACA-
TIONS, FOR INTENSIVE WORK IN THE CONSTITUENCIES, FOR
FAMILIARIZATION TRIPS ABROAD, FOR PRIVATE BUSINESS
ACTIVITY.

3. MRS. THATCHER IS VISITING THE US IN SEPTEMBER, A
WHITE HOUSE CALL, SPEECHES IN WASHINGTON AND HOUSTON.

SIR GEOFFREY HOWE (SHADOW TREASURY), PATRICK JENKIN (SOCIAL SERVICES), TOM KING (NORTH SEA OIL), HAVE ALREADY BEEN THERE. JIM PRIOR (EMPLOYMENT) AND SIR KEITH JOSEPH (INDUSTRY) WILL ALSO VISIT WASHINGTON NEXT MONTH. THE US VISITS ARE INTENDED TO FILL TWO ROLES: GIVE THE CONSERVATIVES A VIEW OF THE NEW ADMINISTRATION, AND GIVE THE NEW ADMINISTRATION A VIEW OF LEADING CONSERVATIVES. THE LATTER AIM REFLECTS A CONTINUING CONSERVATIVE BELIEF THAT SOMEHOW OR ANOTHER THE US "TILTS" TOWARD LABOR IN LOOKING AT THE UK AND CONSERVATIVES WISH TO BE SEEN BY LEADING FIGURES OF THE CARTER ADMINISTRATION AS A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE GOVERNMENT FOR THE UK. CONSERVATIVES DO NOT WISH TO HAVE THE US-UK SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP BURDENED WITH REAL OR IMAGINED ANTI-CONSERVATIVE BIAS FROM WASHINGTON WHEN THEY REGAIN OFFICE AS THEY ARE CONVINCED THEY SHALL IN THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION.

4. RECESS-TIME TRAVEL IS NOT, HOWEVER, CONFINED TO THE ATLANTIC CROSSINGS. A GROUP OF CONSERVATIVE MPS IS OFF ON A POSTPONED VISIT TO COMMUNIST CHINA; THE SHADOW FOREIGN SECRETARY HAS BEEN IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND WILL GO TO AFRICA (NIGERIA PROBABLY). SOME MPS ARE ASSIDUOUSLY VISITING US MILITARY INSTALLATIONS IN BRITAIN, EUROPE, AS WELL AS IN THE US. LADY ELLES HAS BEEN TO A CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN WOMEN IN FINLAND. THE AIMS
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OF THESE TRIPS ARE INDEPENDENT ASSESSMENT OF SITUATIONS ABROAD, FACT-FINDING, AS WELL AS PUBLICITY FOR THE CONSERVATIVE CAUSE IN BRITAIN.

5. THESE ARE RECESS AIMS--FOR THE PARTY REALIZES THAT THE RECESS ITSELF IS PROBABLY MORE HELPFUL TO THE GOVERNMENT THAN TO ITS LOYAL OPPOSITION; THE RECESS VACATES THE PLACE OF IMMEDIATE PERIL FOR THE GOVERNMENT EITHER FROM ITS OWN BENCHES OR FROM THE TENDER FABRIC OF GOVERNMENT SUPPORT: THE LIB-LAB PACT, THE TENUOUS SUPPORT OF THE SNP BASED ON DEVOLUTION PROPOSALS, THE APPEAL TO ULSTER BASED ON A HOPE FOR MORE SEATS IN PARLIAMENT.

6. THE RECESS OFFERS THE OPPOSITION ONLY ONE CHANCE FOR DISCOMFITING THE GOVERNMENT: THE LADYWOOD BY-ELECTION AUGUST 18. THE CONSERVATIVES WANT TO WIN AND THINK THEY CAN. THEY ARE CERTAINLY TRYING TO, PULLING SOME OF THEIR BIG GUNS INTO THE FRAY (THATCHER, WHITELAW, PRIOR). IT WOULDN'T TAKE A SWING LARGER THAN

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THEY'VE ENJOYED IN OTHER BY-ELECTIONS. WHAT IT WILL
TAKE, THOUGH, IS A LOT OF MAN-AND WOMAN-POWER TO GET
OUT THE VOTE. THE CONSERVATIVES ARE GOOD AT THAT AND,
GIVEN THE POSSIBILITY OF A SMALLER-THAN-USUAL POLL IN
AN ALREADY SMALL CONSTITUENCY, GIVEN THE MEANS OF
VACATION OF THE SEAT (WALDEN RESIGNED TO GO TO A
LUCRATIVE JOB IN TV), GIVEN THE SPECTACLE OF STREET
BRAWLING OVER A NATIONAL FRONT RALLY, THEY JUST MIGHT
SWING IT.

7. EVEN IF THE CONSERVATIVES WIN LADYWOOD, HOWEVER,
ONE MORE CONSERVATIVE SEAT IN PARLIAMENT DOESN'T
UNDULY THREATEN THE GOVERNMENT. MUCH MORE WILL BE
REQUIRED: MANY MORE CONSERVATIVE SEATS (NOT TOO LIKELY
IN THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE); OR SNAGS IN THE FRAGILE SKEIN
OF SUPPORT THE GOVERNMENT HAS DEVELOPED WITH THE
LIBERALS, THE MINOR PARTIES AND WITH THE TRADE UNIONS
AND, INTERNALLY, THE CONTAINMENT OF THE DIVISIVENESS
IN THE LABOR PARTY ITSELF.

8. THE CONSERVATIVES CAN BE EXPECTED TO CONTINUE
PROBING THE POSSIBILITIES FOR BRINGING DOWN THE GOVERN-
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MENT AND BRINGING ON AN ELECTION. BUT WHAT CAN THEY REALISTICALLY EXPECT IN THE COMING MONTHS WHICH WILL BRING CLOSER THE 'MOMENT OF TRUTH', I.E., THE ELECTION?

9. WELL, LOTS OF SOUND AND FURY FOR ONE THING. THE ANNUAL SEASON OF CONFERENCES UNDER TV'S MERCILESS GLARE WILL ADD TO THE ATTRACTIONS THE CONSERVATIVES OFFER THE BRITISH PUBLIC. BEGINNING WITH THE TUC CONFERENCE SEPTMBER 5, THE PUBLIC WILL BE OFFERED AN ALARMING DIET OF LABOR DISHARMONY, DISCORD AND POLITICAL MAYHEM. THE DISCOMFORT OF THE TUC ATTEMPTING TO MAINTAIN UNITY AND A KIND OF RESTRAINT ON WAGE INCREASES IN THE FACE OF LARGE CLAIMS BY INDIVIDUAL UNIONS WILL BE APPARENT.

10. THE CONSERVATIVES WILL ALSO PROBABLY PROFIT FROM THE TRADITIONAL RAMBUNCTIOUSNESS OF THE LEFT AT THE LABOR CONFERENCE AT BRIGHTON (OCTOBER 3) THIS YEAR GIVEN AN ADDED DIMENSION BY THE PARTY'S INVITATION TO EUROCOMMUNIST PARTIES.

THE THRUST AND PUSH OF THE LABOR LEFT ON DEFENSE SPENDING, BROCEDURES FOR ELECTING THE LEADER, AND OTHER FAVORITE TARGET AREAS (FURTHER NATIONALIZATION SCHEMES, GREATER REFLATION TO COMBAT UNEMPLOYMENT, ETC.) WILL ONLY ADD TO THE IMAGE OF A DIVIDED LABOR PARTY, WITH GROWING POWER ON THE LEFT.

11. AT THE LIBERAL ASSEMBLY (SEPTEMBER 26), THE PACT THAT LEADER DAVID STEEL HAS MADE WITH JAMES CALLAGHAN WILL PREDICTABLY COME UNDER HEAVY ATTACK, SPEARHEADED BY HEAVYWEIGHT LIBERAL MP CYRIL SMITH, WHO IS IMMENSELY POPULAR WITH THE LIBERAL FAITHFUL. THE PURISTS, THE THEORETICIANS, AND THE LIBERAL CONSTITUENCY ACTIVISTS, WHO HAVE HAD TO FACE A LACK OF INTEREST IN THE LIBERALS

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ON THE DOORSTEP IN BY-ELECTION AND LOCAL ELECTIONS WILL BE ACCENTUATING THE NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF THE PACT AND PRESSING FOR A RETURN TO A PURER AND LESS CONTAMINATED LIBERAL IMAGE. STEEL WILL HAVE A ROUGH ASSEMBLY, BUT THERE ARE AS YET NO SIGNS HE WILL BE FORCED TO CHANGE HIS COMMITMENT TO UNCLE JIM.

12. THE STAGE MANAGERS OF THE CONSERVATIVE CONFERENCE AT BLACKPOOL (OCTOBER 11) HAVE AN EASIER PROSPECT IN VIEW. CONSERVATIVES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN QLAD TO HAVE SOME MANIPULATION OF THE CONFERENCE, ITS AGENDA AND THE VOTES, EVEN THE SELECTION OF SPEAKERS, GOING ON BEHIND THE SCENES. RESTIVENESS OF THE TROOPS WILL BE EVIDENT, PROBABLY IN DEBATES ON FOREIGN OOLICY (KITH AND KIN IN

SOUTHERN AFRICA), INDUSTRIAL POLICY (MORE OR LESS CONFRONTATION WITH THE UNIONS), EDUCATION (COMPREHENSIVES AND/OR PRIVATE SCHOOLING), CAPITAL PUNISHMENT, CRIME IN THE STREETS, DISCIPLINE IN EDUCATION, OR OTHER SUCH TRADITIONAL BELOVED TOPICS. BUT ALMOST EVERYONE RECOGNIZES THAT CONSERVATIVE CONFERENCES AIR POLICIES AND DO NOT SHAPE THEM. EVEN THOSE MOST FERVENT CONFERENCE ATTENDEES CAN BE EXPECTED TO CALM DOWN AND PRESENT AN IMAGE OF PARTY UNITY AND SUPPORT FOR ITS LEADER. WHY EVEN TED HEATH SEEMS TO BE MOVING BACK CLOSER TO THE TEAM. HE IS THE FEATURE SPEAKER AT THE CONSERVATIVE POLITICAL LECTURE EX-CONFERENCE* THE CONSERVATIVE CONFERENCE MAY END UP DEVOID OF

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CONTRAST WITH OTHER PARTY ASSEMBLAGES.

13. THE NEXT MONTHS, THEREFORE, POSE FEW REAL PROBLEMS FOR THE CONSERVATIVES AND SOME POSSIBLE GAINS. ONE OF THE DANGERS TO WHICH THEY ARE ALERT, HOWEVER, IS THAT OF COMPLACENCY: THE CONSERVATIVES APPEAR TO BELIEVE THAT ELECTIONS, WHENEVER THEY COME, WILL BRING CONTROVERSY AND ALMOST BORING IN ITS UNANIMITY BY CONTRAST WITH OTHER PARTY ASSEMBLAGES.

13. THE NEXT MONTHS, THEREFORE, POSE FEW REAL PROBLEMS FOR THE CONSERVATIVES AND SOME POSSIBLE GAINS. ONE OF

THE DANGERS TO WHICH THEY ARE ALERT, HOWEVER, IS THAT OF COMPLACENCY: THE CONSERVATIVES APPEAR TO BELIEVE THAT ELECTIONS, WHENEVER THEY COME, WILL BRING CONSERVATIVES BACK TO POWER. BUT SINCE THE TIMING OF AN ELECTION LIES NOT SO MUCH IN CONSERVATIVE HEADS AS IN THE COMBINATION OF THE GOVERNMENT'S ANALYSIS OF THE SITUATION WITH THE DEVELOPING ECONOMIC SITUATION (PARTICULARLY THE KNOTTY COMBINATION OF THE PROGRESS OF INFLATION, UNEMPLOYMENT AND WAGES), THE CONSERVATIVES CAN'T AFFORD COMPLACENCY. SOME TIME AGO, MRS. THATCHER

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LIKENED THE PROSPECTS OF AVOIDING AN ELECTION FOR THE LABOR GOVERNMENT TO A "KNIFE-EDGE," A FIGURE WE CONSIDER APPROPRIATE BUT CHARACTERISTICALLY OVER-DRAMATIC. THIS IS WHY MRS. THATCHER (AND OTHER PARTY LEADERS) CONTINUALLY ARE TRYING TO KEEP THE TROOPS AT READINESS / ALERT. AND THIS IS WHY, TOO, THE LEADERS OF THE PARTY ARE TRYING TO MAKE USE OF THE RECESS TO VISIT ABROAD.

14. WHEN SHE VISITS THE US IN SEPTEMBER, MRS. THATCHER WILL BE IN A CONSIDERABLY STRENGTHENED POSITION COMPARED WITH HER 1975 VISIT WHEN, AS A NEWLY-ELECTED PARTY LEADER BY VIRTUE OF ACCIDENT AS WELL AS SHREWD POLITICKING, THE PARTY WAS QUIZZICAL ABOUT A THATCHER LEADERSHIP. THE PARTY WAS STILL TORN BY ITS OLD LOYALTIES TO HEATH AND WORRIED ABOUT THE DIRECTION IN WHICH THATCHER WOULD TAKE THE PARTY AND HOW FAST. REASSURED BY HER MANAGEMENT OF PARTY AFFAIRS, BY HER OCCASIONAL SPARKLING PERFORMANCES IN PARLIAMENT AND IN THE MEDIA, PLEASED BY CONSERVATIVE SUCCESSES IN BY-ELECTION AND LOCAL ELECTIONS (FOR WHICH ONE IS CREDITED) THE PARTY IS NOW SOLIDLY BEHIND HER.

15. THIS HAS INCREASED MRS. THATCHER'S SELF-CONFIDENCE WHICH, COMBINED WITH HER IRON WILL (SOME CRITICS CALL HER "STUBBORN"), HARD WORK AND DEDICATION, IS A CONSIDERABLE ASSET. THERE HAS NEVER BEEN MUCH DOUBT ABOUT HER ABILITY, THE QUICKNESS OF HER MIND, HER OCCASIONAL POLITICAL FLAIR. SHE HAS WORKED HARD TO INCREASE HER EXPERTISE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS. IN HER OWN WAY, SHE IS NOW SHOWING FULLY AS MUCH SKILL AS CALAGHAN IN LIVING ON THE KNIFE-EDGE.

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Message Attributes

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Disposition Approved on Date:
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